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NATURAL HISTORY
OF THE
CORONADO ISLANDS

BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO
(revisited 1992)

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BIRDS AND MARINE MAMMALS OF THE CORONADO ISLANDS

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BIRDS

The Coronado Islands provide important habitat for a variety of resident and migratory birds. Over 170 species have been recorded at the islands, about 30 of which are known to breed there.

For nearly a hundred years the islands have been visited by ornithologists, most often to remain for only a few hours to make collections or record observations. Considering the islands' proximity to the mainland, it is surprising that there have been few in-depth investigations undertaken. Despite this, much information on the birds has been amassed. Islands have an attraction and mystique for scientists, in part because they often provide a laboratory-like limited ecosystem for investigations into evolution and species' dispersal.

Information on the early ornithological visits to the islands can be found in Grinnell (1928), and a brief annotated list of species recorded up to June 1977 is provided by Jehl (1977).

Seabirds

Most seabird species nest on islands because of the security from terrestrial

predators usually afforded by isolation. The Coronados have long been recognized as one of the most important seabird colonies on the west coast of North America. Recent human occupation has taken its toll, however, resulting from introduction of alien animals and more directly due to collection of seabird eggs for markets in Baja California. Dogs, cats, goats, burros, pigs, and chickens have all been brought to South Island by the lighthouse keepers, military personnel, and transient fishermen. These animals have altered the vegetation and discouraged much seabird breeding. Until 10-15 years ago, North Island was free of terrestrial predators and supported large numbers of breeding seabirds. Feral cats were introduced at that time, and have since wreaked havoc on a variety of seabirds. Only Middle Island and Middle Rock are currently free of introduced predators, and both appear to be at or near carrying capacity for breeding seabirds.

The most abundant and conspicuous breeding seabird is the Western Gull. Perhaps by sheer numbers they have resisted predation and continue to breed on all the islands. As

many as 5000 pairs nest on the islands in good years. California Brown Pelicans have nested on North Island for decades, until the last few years when disturbance by egg collectors appears to have forced a move of the colony to Middle Island. Nesting dates are highly variable for pelicans, with nests being recorded as early as January and as late as July. Studies in the late 1960's of Pelican eggshell thickness at the Coronados and at Anacapa Island led scientists to the discovery that DDT was having deleterious effects in the environment, which ultimately led to a ban of its use in the United States.

Small colonies of Double-crested Cormorants and Brandt's Cormorants still nest annually at the islands. A few pairs of Pelagic Cormorants usually breed every year, the southernmost nesting locale for this species. Black Oystercatchers nest along the shores of the islands, and occasionally one or two American Oystercatchers can be found.

Far less conspicuous are the large numbers of nocturnal, subterranean-nesting seabirds that annually come to the islands to breed. Small and vulnerable to predation by gulls and falcons, these birds approach the islands only during the breeding season, well after dark. They carry out their activities before daylight, then return to sea to feed or stay securely concealed in deep nesting crevices or burrows until a following

night. These species include Black and Leach's Storm-Petrel, Xantus' Murrelet, and Cassin's Auklet.

Many other seabird or shorebird species winter, roost on the islands, or pass by in migration, stopping to feed in the productive surrounding waters.

Land Birds

Relatively few land bird species breed at the Coronado Islands. The Coronado Islands Song Sparrow is the only endemic form known from the islands, and it is now suspected to be extinct. Bald Eagles nested at the islands around the turn of the century, but have remained absent until recently when a few sightings have been reported. Peregrine Falcons were once common at the islands. Increasing sightings give rise to hopes that this species will re-occupy historic nesting territories. Often seen breeding land bird species include Red-tailed Hawks, American Kestrels, Barn Swallows, Common Ravens, Rock Wrens, Orange-crowned Warblers, and House Finches. California Quail have been introduced to South Island.

Migratory land birds are often sighted at the islands, including many "vagrant" species rarely seen on the adjacent mainland. The islands sometimes function as a "trap" for these avian waifs.

MARINE MAMMALS

Cetaceans

Whales and dolphins are regularly seen in waters surrounding the Coronado Islands. Most predictable are California Grey Whales, whose migratory route between Alaska and Mexico takes many individuals through the islands between December and April. In recent years a few Blue Whales and Humpback Whales have been sighted during summer months. Killer Whales and Short-finned Pilot Whales also occur there infrequently.

Common Dolphins are sometimes seen enroute to the islands, and less frequently recorded are Pacific White-sided Dolphins and Bottlenose Dolphins.

Otters

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Southern Sea Otters were undoubtedly common in the kelp forests surrounding the Coronado Islands. Commercial hunting rapidly extirpated the species through its range. It was once thought to be extinct, but a remnant population in the Monterey area survived and has been slowly expanding. Efforts are currently underway to re-introduce the species to San Nicolas Island. Otters from this program have been sighted at several other locations in the Southern California Bight, including a recent sighting of an individual at the Coronado Islands that likely originated from this group.

Pinnipeds

Shorelines of the Coronado Islands provide a variety of habitats for seals and sea lions. Most abundant and conspicuous are the California Sea Lions. Large numbers of sea lions, sometimes in the thousands, haul out on the steep, rocky, west-facing slopes of both North and South Islands. Shy and inquisitive Harbor Seals can always be found on rocks exposed by the tide, usually in the sheltered lee of the islands. Northern Elephant Seals can almost always be found on the only consistently sandy beach in the islands, located in a small cove on the west side of South Island. Due to thick kelp and usually strong surge, approaching this cove by boat can be risky, but with a pair of binoculars they can easily be observed. A few can sometimes be seen on the small beach in the lee of Middle Island (Moonlight Cove).

REFERENCES

- Grinnell, J. 1928. A distributional summation of the ornithology of Lower California. University of California Publications in Zoology 32:1-300.
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